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Mustafa Kemal at Gallipoli: A Leadership Analysis and Terrain Walk

by

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Abstract

The Gallipoli campaign is widely considered one of the Allies' greatest disasters of the First World War. The campaign was conceived as a way to break the bloody stalemate on the Western Front, knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war, and open a sea line of communication to the Russian Empire. The invasion failed to achieve any of these goals and was instead blunted by determined Ottoman resistance under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal. This essay examines the strategic context of the Gallipoli campaign, Kemal's actions during two key stands at Chunuk Bair in April and August 1915, and the enduring leadership lessons that can be drawn from these events. Specifically, Kemal's actions demonstrated that taking the initiative, leading by example, and motivating and inspiring others are more than catchphrases. When applied in the crucible of battle, they are in fact enduring leadership principles that can change the course of history.

The Allied invasion of the Gallipoli peninsula during the First World War was intended to provide a strategic breakthrough that was unattainable on the Western Front. Instead the result was one of the Allies' greatest blunders of the war, one that cost the lives of over 48,000 Allied soldiers while failing to achieve any of the operational objectives of the campaign. The reasons for the failure are numerous, including improper preparation of the invading forces, incomplete intelligence, and an underestimation of the enemy's will to fight. Perhaps the most critical factor was the determined leadership of the Ottoman defenders, notably Mustafa Kemal. This essay will examine the strategic context of the Gallipoli campaign, Kemal's actions during two key stands at Chunuk Bair in April and August 1915, and the enduring leadership lessons that can be drawn from these events.

By January 1915, the Western Front had bogged down into static trench warfare along an unbroken line that stretched from the Belgian coast on the North Sea to the border of Switzerland. The cost of this bloody stalemate that would characterize the Great War was becoming increasingly clear as the British, French, and Germans had already sustained over two million casualties in less than six months of fighting.¹ The British contemplated opening a second front to help break the stalemate, a proposition that gained greater urgency on 1 January 1915 when the Russian Empire formally requested "naval or military demonstration against the Turks to ease the pressure caused by the Turkish offensive" in the Caucasus Mountains.² British strategists conceived a plan that would not only open a second front but also achieve two key objectives: knock Germany's ally, the Ottoman Empire, out of the war and secure a sea line of communication through the Dardanelles Strait to supply the beleaguered Russians.

The first British plan was a navy-only option that envisaged sending a combined British-French armada through the Dardanelles and laying siege to the Ottoman capital at

Constantinople. The Dardanelles is a strategically important waterway in the northwest of modern-day Turkey that connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Sea of Marmara, and by extension to the Black Sea through the Bosphorus Strait. Less than a mile wide at its narrowest point, the Dardanelles is one of the narrowest straits in the world utilized for international navigation. By January 1915, the Ottomans had effectively closed the Dardanelles for over five months, essentially choking off the Russians' ability to export wheat and other agricultural goods and preventing them from receiving shipments of arms and other much needed war-making materiel.³

The Allies attempted a naval assault to secure the Dardanelles beginning in February 1915 when British warships bombarded Ottoman fortresses at the mouth of the strait. Despite their success in destroying key fortifications, they were unable to neutralize the Ottoman's mobile artillery batteries or the series of naval mines that continued to threaten safe passage through the strait. On March 18, 1915, after weeks of concerted counter-mine efforts, a combined British and French fleet attempted an audacious, if ill-conceived, daylight passage through the strait that resulted in disaster. By the end of the day, three capital ships had been sunk, three additional ships had been severely damaged by mines, and the entire fleet was withdrawn.⁴ This action had several important consequences. First, it eliminated any element of surprise the Allies had as the attacking force and thus enabled the Ottomans to seize the initiative. Additionally, it proved the key British assumption – that the Ottomans were unable or unwilling to defend their territory from an Allied assault – to be woefully inaccurate.⁵ The latter would be demonstrated with even more tragic results when the Allies again attempted to gain control of the Dardanelles by invading Gallipoli.

The Gallipoli peninsula is a narrow strip of land that runs south-westerly into the Aegean Sea from Thrace, the European portion of modern Turkey. It is 47 miles in length and between three and twelve miles wide at its narrowest and widest points, respectively. The peninsula forms the northern boundary of the Dardanelles Strait and therefore offers a key strategic advantage to whoever possesses it by giving them the ability to control one of the world's critical maritime choke points. The peninsula's topography is categorized into six distinct land systems, ranging from low-lying coastal plains near Suvla Bay, to a series of northeast to southwest oriented plateaus with "deeply incised valleys" averaging roughly 300 meters in height, as typified by the Sari Bair ridge.⁶ The peninsula has very few wooded areas and is largely covered with dense, low, ground cover scrub. A paper presented by the Royal Geographical Society in April 1915 succinctly summarized the potential effects of terrain on the upcoming battle: "the western end of the Gallipoli Peninsula is of broken hilly character, which combines with lack of water and consequent lack of population and roads to render it an unfavourable area for military operations. No general, if he had the choice, would land a considerable force upon it at any spot below the narrows."⁷ Unfortunately for the Allies, General Sir Ian Hamilton, the commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, and his staff were unaware of this appraisal and had instead based their entire planning effort around poor intelligence and an incomplete understanding of the terrain.⁸

German General Otto Liman Von Sanders, the commander of the Ottoman 5th Army responsible for the overall defense of the Gallipoli peninsula, had anticipated the main allied landing to occur at Bulair, a narrow point on the northeastern end of the peninsula close to where it meets the mainland.⁹ In April 1915 he had 100,212 men under his command, organized into six infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade. Liman Von Sanders was perceptive enough to

realize the key to the defense was keeping sufficient strength in reserve and allowing him to mass forces rather than spreading his units piecemeal all along the peninsula in an attempt to stop invaders at the beach.¹⁰ One of his reserve forces was the 19th Infantry Division, commanded by a then-unknown Lt Col Mustafa Kemal. Due to his intimate knowledge of the terrain, Kemal intuitively knew the Allies were most likely to land at Cape Helles on the southwestern tip of the peninsula and at Kabatepe, roughly 10 miles northeast of Cape Helles on the west coast.¹¹

When the Allied invasion began around 0500 hours on 25 April 1915, the British 29th Division went ashore at five landing beaches in the vicinity of Cape Helles. Meanwhile the Australia-New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACs) intended to land at Kabatepe, but missed by over one mile and instead began putting 30,000 men ashore at Ari Burnu. This area, which would go down in history as ANZAC cove, was relatively lightly defended by a single Ottoman infantry regiment. Despite the lighter defenses, the geography was far less hospitable to an invading force than Kabatepe, consisting of narrow sandy beaches overlooked by steep, craggy terrain features that rose prominently from the landing area.

Two hours after the first ANZAC forces came ashore Kemal still had not received orders from Liman Von Sanders to mobilize his forces, so the entire 19th Division sat idle during that critical period. At that moment, without orders from his superiors, Kemal took decisive action by personally leading the 57th Infantry Regiment, his best unit, into the battle zone to assess the situation. He headed for Chunuk Bair which, as the high point in the Sari Bair ridge that overlooked the entire landing area, became the key to the peninsula's defense.¹² The Sari Bair ridge was such a prominent geographical feature that securing its commanding heights was the invading ANZACs' objective for the first day of the campaign.

When he arrived at Chunuk Bair, Kemal made an immediate impact on the course of events. In a successful tactical ruse, Kemal was able to regroup fleeing soldiers of the 9th Division's 27th Regiment who had run out of ammunition by ordering them to lie down and fix bayonets. This maneuver fooled the advancing ANZACs into thinking they faced an impending ambush and bought all-important time for additional Ottoman reinforcements from Kemal's 57th Regiment to arrive.¹³ By 1030 on 25 April, Kemal was organizing the first significant counter-offensive of the campaign and explaining the importance of controlling the high ground at all cost.¹⁴ It was then that he issued his famous order to the men of the 57th Regiment: "I do not expect you to attack. I am ordering you to die. In the time which passes until we die, other troops and commanders can come and take our place."¹⁵ Kemal immediately sent two battalions into action below Chunuk Bair, fighting from its slopes and those of nearby Battleship Hill, while one battalion remained in reserve.

The battle that ensued was chaotic, described by British Major General C.E. Callwell as "disjointed encounters...a succession of haphazard, but sanguinary, affrays in gullies and on the hillsides."¹⁶ A series of fierce attacks and counter-attacks that included bayonet charges and hand-to-hand fighting occurred in the rocky ravines and scrub-covered gorges throughout the day. Despite being outnumbered nearly three-to-one by the attacking forces and suffering heavy casualties that included the virtual annihilation of the 57th Regiment, the Ottoman defenders pushed the invading forces back to their tenuous beachhead. When he was notified that the 9th Division, located in the adjacent sector, would be unable to support his efforts with reinforcements, Kemal deployed his 77th Infantry Regiment to the south to shore up his left flank and sent his 72nd Infantry Regiment closer to the front.

During it all, Kemal maintained a constant presence along the high ground, monitoring the action with binoculars and directing his forces while being exposed to the same hostile artillery and rifle fire as his men. As the first day of the battle came to a close, Kemal decisive actions had established him as the de facto commander of all Ottoman forces in the Ari Burnu sector, a title that was later officially bestowed upon him by his corps commander. More importantly, however, the determined Ottoman resistance caused the Allies to halt their forward progress and even contemplate withdrawing the ANZAC forces. Instead Hamilton decided to continue the campaign, telling his subordinate commander, “You have gotten through the difficult business, now you have only to dig, dig, dig, until you are safe.”¹⁷ This seemingly innocuous message gave Kemal and his Ottoman defenders invaluable time to regroup and reinforce their defensive positions and also had the perverse effect of ushering in the type of static attrition warfare the Allied high command had hoped to avoid by embarking on the Gallipoli campaign in the first place.

The Allies tried to break the stalemate in August 1915 by planning another amphibious assault, this time at Suvla Bay, approximately five miles north of ANZAC cove. The intent was to take advantage of the flat land of the Suvla plain and the relatively light Ottoman defenses in order to gain the high ground of the Anafarta Ridge to the east of the bay. Once in this position, they could then turn south and attack the flank of the Ottoman positions on the heights of the Sari Bair ridge. The attack was to be coordinated with an ANZAC assault at Ari Burnu that would serve two purposes: occupy key positions on the southern portion of Sari Bair ridge and keep the Ottomans occupied and thus unable to reinforce Suvla.¹⁸ Unfortunately for the Allies, leadership would once again be a critical factor in the assault. For the invading forces, Lieutenant General

Sir Frederick Stopford would make a consequential blunder, while now-Colonel Mustafa Kemal would once again play a decisive role in fighting at Chunuk Bair.

On the evening of 6 August 1915, the Allies landed the British 10th and 11th Divisions at Suvla Bay. At the same time the ANZACs launched a diversionary attack on the southern end of the Ari Burnu sector at Lone Pine, and a main assault in two columns toward high points in the Sari Bair ridge, Chunuk Bair and Hill 971. The 20,000 ANZAC soldiers negotiated a “confusing terrain of outcroppings, gorges, and razorback ridges overgrown with brush,”¹⁹ and the forces at Lone Pine suffered horrific casualties. To illustrate the ferocity of the struggle: seven Victoria Crosses were earned and the 1st Australian Brigade suffered over 1,700 casualties, with one battalion enduring a staggering 74 percent casualty rate. The main assault toward Sari Bair fared better, although it still faced stiff Ottoman resistance from a series of strong points along the broken slopes. The Allies advanced under the cover of relentless Royal Navy artillery barrages and after nightfall on 7-8 August, the New Zealand Wellington Battalion was able to seize their objective atop Chunuk Bair.²⁰

On the morning of 10 August, Kemal led a counter-attack. In his usual manner, he was intimately involved in planning the operation and personally conducted pre-attack reconnaissance. He rallied his officers by explaining the importance of the upcoming battle, stating “I am convinced that we must drive the enemy into the sea, even if it means the death of us all...I am sure there is not one among the troops we command who would rather die here than see a repeat of our Balkan disgrace.”²¹ In the pre-dawn hours on 10 August, Kemal was lying on the ground at the forward edge of his lines waiting to give the order to attack. When the preparatory artillery barrage ended, he stood up, waved his riding crop (the pre-arranged signal), and set 16 battalions in motion toward the objective.²² During the fighting, Kemal was hit in the

chest by shrapnel. When a subordinate noticed and reacted by shouting “sir, you’ve been shot,” Kemal put his hand over the man’s mouth and ordered him to be quiet so as to not negatively affect his soldiers’ morale.²³ As it turned out the shrapnel fortuitously hit Kemal’s pocket watch, which saved his life, and the attack continued unabated. By the end of the day Chunuk Bair had been retaken at a cost of 5,000 Ottoman casualties.

The tenacity of the fighting at Chunuk Bair reflected the critical nature of the tactical situation; it was the key to the entire Ottoman position.²⁴ The Allied advance on Sari Bair ridge was stunted by a well-led counter-attack by a determined adversary and the landing at Suvla Bay bogged down because indecisive Allied leadership failed to seize the initiative. The result was that the combined offensive achieved little more than extending the Allied line to the north, returning to the stalemate that had prevailed for the previous three months. The Allies never again launched a major offensive in the Gallipoli campaign. They began withdrawing forces from the ANZAC sector in December 1915, completing the total withdrawal of forces in January 1916.

Kemal’s stands at Chunuk Bair during the Gallipoli campaign in April and August 1915 were his “leadership moments,” the critical moments when arguably nothing short of national survival were at stake. Kemal was able to identify key terrain, take the initiative, demonstrate personal courage, and motivate and inspire his followers. All of these actions enabled him to utilize inferior numbers to achieve tactical victories that ultimately shaped the outcome of the entire campaign.

A significant contributing factor to the Ottoman success was Kemal’s ability to identify the key terrain at Chunuk Bair. Previous assignments in Syria and Tripolitana had taught him valuable lessons in utilizing terrain for tactical advantage and a previous stint in Gallipoli during

the Balkan Wars provided him first-hand knowledge of the peninsula's peculiar geography. Beyond simply being able to identify the high ground or assess which beaches were conducive to amphibious landings, he had the intuitive understanding that the Allies would not land at the most obvious site, Bulair, but instead aim for Cape Helles and Kabatepe. Kemal's superior, Liman Von Sanders, could not overcome a cognitive bias that continued to make him believe the main assault would occur at Bulair, even after the Allies had landed in force at on the southwest sector of the peninsula as Kemal had predicted. This incorrect assumption caused Liman Von Sanders to keep five divisions in reserve in the northeast sector of the peninsula for three days, an act of hesitation that could have tipped the balance of the contest.²⁵ In fact, Kemal would later claim the Allies could have been "thrown back in the sea at the outset" if Liman Von Sanders had heeded his warnings.²⁶

Kemal's decision to take action during those crucial early hours of 25 April without receiving orders demonstrates the importance of leaders taking the initiative and leading from the front. It is hard to imagine the Ottomans stopping the invaders without Kemal, "map in hand, leading his first regiment into action, launching it into an attack with less than a hundred men and winning."²⁷ It is illustrative to compare Kemal's successful example of seizing the initiative with Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Stopford's inability to do so. As the commander of the invasion force at Suvla Bay in August 1915, Stopford did not press his attack to the high ground of the Anafarta Ridge on the first day of the campaign, despite light opposition.²⁸ Instead, from the comfort of a ship in the Aegean, Stopford inexplicably ordered his men to stop and dig trenches to defend the beaches.²⁹ This hesitation sapped the Allies' momentum and provided invaluable time for the Ottoman defenders to reinforce the sector.

Kemal's ability to set a personal example was a critical aspect of building a cohesive team and establishing mutual trust with his soldiers. His willingness to lead from the front and put himself in danger should be contrasted with Allied generals, like Stopford, who typically pushed their men into battle from the relative safety of a beach or ship offshore.³⁰ Kemal's actions also won the trust and confidence of his superiors. Reflecting on his decision to put Kemal in command of the August counter-attacks, Liman Von Sanders noted in his diary, he "remained for three months in the Ari Burnu front tenaciously and inflexibly resisting all attacks. I had full confidence in his energy."³¹

Kemal was able to further build trust with subordinates by being able to clearly articulate the importance of their duty. In addition to appealing to his officer's sense of shame over past defeats as discussed earlier, he could also tailor his message when speaking to his enlisted soldiers. Kemal knew what motivated his men and was known to incorporate themes that resonated with the rank-and-file such as their shared Muslim faith or their patriotism. He appealed to their sense of honor, telling his men: "every soldier who fights here with me must realize he is honor-bound not to retreat one step...if you want to rest, there will be no rest for our whole nation throughout eternity."³² After the victory at Gallipoli, the notion of the empire's victory over the "seven nations" would become a mainstay of Ottoman propaganda and a rallying cry for Kemal and his troops.³³

The decisive leadership of Mustafa Kemal was one of the deciding factors that affected the outcome on the Gallipoli peninsula during the critical spring and summer months of 1915. As George S. Patton noted, "Had the two sets of commanders changed sides, the landing would have been as great a success as it was a dismal failure."³⁴ He not only helped ensure the Allies did not achieve their immediate tactical objectives, but the outcome of two critical stands at

Chunuk Bair ultimately led to the complete failure of their entire campaign. Kemal's leadership on Gallipoli also set in motion a series of events that would make him one of the most influential statesmen of the twentieth century.



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Notes

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